

Successful demobilization process ends with smiles

MAIN STORY

Demob team eases reintegration turbulence

By Deidre Forster
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Avoiding all the bumps on the road to reintegration may seem like an unattainable goal, but the Wyoming Army National Guard's demobilization team hopes to make that road as smooth as possible for its Soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

So, on June 4, the team headed to the Land of the Midnight Sun to pave the way home for 24 maintenance personnel, who spent much of the last year in Kandahar as part of Alaska's 207th Infantry Brigade. Wyoming was one of eight states augmenting the brigade for its Afghanistan deployment.

"When we came to Alaska during the mobilization process, it was very apparent to me that we go above and beyond to ensure our Soldiers are prepared for every phase of the process," said Maj. Shane Crofts, the mobilization officer for the Wyoming Army National Guard.

He recounted a story of meeting another state's National Guard Soldier preparing to join the Alaska unit. That Soldier's luggage had broken apart after the flight and he was busy stuffing clothing – including his Class A uniform – back into the bags. "I asked him why he brought that along and he said no one told him what to bring. I told him to ship that home; he wasn't going to need it. It made me realize just how much our state does for our Soldiers compared to other states. Bringing the demob team here is another example."

But Wyoming's demob team didn't always exist. "We learned early on that key items were missing from the demob process," said Col. Joe Dunn, Wyoming Army National Guard deputy chief of staff for operations. "Our Soldiers have 90 days of leave before they return to a drilling status. We are determined to, A: give them as much of that 90-day leave period as

possible, and B: ensure when they do return to a drilling status, they do so with accurate documentation of their deployment, as well as with all the benefits they are entitled.”

“The idea is to assist our Wyoming Soldiers with the items they normally would need to complete after arriving in Wyoming,” Crofts said. “Our No. 1 priority is to ensure their return home is accomplished with as little turbulence as possible.”

To avoid the bumps – and the need to spend three extra days in Wyoming away from their families – the Wyoming Army National Guard brings its personnelists, medical specialists, logisticians, retention, family support, and employment assistance staff and outside partners, like the Wyoming Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve and the Veterans’ Administration, to a demob site to complete much of the required elements before the Soldiers step onto Wyoming soil.

“I get a huge sense of satisfaction knowing these Soldiers can return home armed with the tools to seek employment, or can breathe easier knowing reemployment isn’t a problem,” said Laura Mead, program support specialist for the Wyoming Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve. Mead briefs unit members on their civilian employment rights and responsibilities; she is followed in the demob process by Becki Hunter, employment coordinator for the Wyoming Army National Guard.

“Really we know much of what we brief them they have heard before and are tired of hearing again,” Hunter said. “So we spend much of our time just getting to know the unit members. Talking with them and showing them we are here for them, should they need us when they get home, is just as important as our briefings.”

It was good to see faces from home, said Master Sgt. Bob Dockins, a supply specialist with the unit. “It’s great you guys are here. It’s an unexpected surprise,” he said. But, he also said it wasn’t a shock to see Wyoming people coming to take care of their own.

Part of the demob team includes a chaplain and mental health specialists. It’s their job to reinforce the idea the demob team’s assistance doesn’t stop when the unit returns to

Wyoming.

“You have just entered the last stage of the battle,” Lt. Col. Dave Hall, the Wyoming National Guard’s acting state chaplain, told the unit members on the demob team’s last day in Alaska.

“We’re good Soldiers but we can’t handle everything. Our first reaction is to suck it up and try harder, but if your world is falling over, get help. We know that on the battlefield, but we don’t do that at home. Reintegration is the toughest part of a deployment. A successful deployment is when you’ve reintegrated back home, not when you land there.”

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SIDEBAR

Wyoming Soldiers “maintain” a happy homecoming

By Officer Candidate Christian Venhuizen
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The 24 Soldiers who deployed from Wyoming 14 months ago, in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, left as a composite unit made up of maintenance career fields from units throughout the Wyoming Army National Guard. They returned, Friday, with a new motto, “Maintenance First!”, and a sense of relief that only comes when surrounded by the arms of a loved one, wrapped tight.

Screams of joy were let out by some family members, only to subside into quieter comments of adoration, barely audible over the engine noise of the bus and the cheers of the crowd. On this day, not personal greetings from the governor of Wyoming nor the assistant adjutant general for Wyoming’s Army National Guard could come close to bringing out smiles like those that came from hugs from a 9-year-old.

These Soldiers didn’t have an easy time reaching home – from the airport. After landing in Denver, the Soldiers discovered the bus they had was too small to hold them and their gear. The first sergeant and another senior non-commissioned officer stayed behind the main group

to secure a rented vehicle to bring the gear home.

However, the two would rejoin the rest of their Soldiers – not in Wyoming, but just outside of Denver. The trailer the main group was hauling had a flat tire.

When the families were told of the delay, a mix of sounds of disbelief, groans of displeasure and a surprising bout of laughter rang out. Some in the crowd wondered out loud, “I wonder just how long it’ll take that bus full of maintenance guys to change this flat?”

The answer – about 30 minutes.

When the bus arrived at the Wyoming-Colorado border, the families began taking their places, flags and signs in hand. That 15-minute warning cued the band and set into motion the butterflies that were in the bellies of the wives, girlfriends, children and families that hadn’t seen their Soldiers in 14 months.

It was the two senior NCOs who arrived to shake hands with the governor and general first. They were quickly joined by the rest of the unit, departing the bus and dispersing into the crowd. Some were mobbed by family before they could take more than a few steps away from the dignitaries who greeted them. Some walked to the grassy hillside where their families waited.

Formalities were kept, only by those who spoke, briefly, before dismissing the Soldiers to their loved ones. For the maintenance Soldiers of the Wyoming Army National Guard, they were under a new command, their families.

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Photos available upon request or at the Wyoming National Guard Web site
<http://www.wy.ngb.army.mil/PAO/release/release.asp>

060807-A-0301V-003.jpg SUGGESTED OUTLINE: MY DADDY’S COMING HOME – Khayla Otero awaits the arrival of her dad, Sgt. Eric Otero, from a 14-month deployment with the Wyoming Army National Guard in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, June 8, in Cheyenne.

060807-A 0301V-0022.jpg
SUGGESTED OUTLINE: ALL SMILES, ALL UNIFORMED – Wyoming Army National Guard

Sgt. Kevin Rowland is greeted with a big hug from his daughter, Isabella, after returning to Wyoming from a 14-month deployment in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, in Cheyenne.